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AUTHOR Davies, Richard Ed
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate response to the film, "Parable," a 20-minute color film which depicts a clown in a circus setting and which has no dialog but evokes strong emotional/affective reactions. Postviewing reactions to the film by 141 adults from age 20 to 70 of United Methodist churches in southern Indiana were researched. Although the film is more frequently shown to youth, adults were queried because it was felt that adult theological belief systems are more fully developed. The study attempts to describe their reactions and relate the reactions to patterns of theological belief. Theological belief was measured by having participants complete Lee's (1965) Religious Belief Inventory before they watched the film. Emotional/affective reactions were measured by (1) previewing and postviewing completion of Buros' Multiple Affect Adjective Check List (1972), and (2) postfilm semantic differential responses to 11 film-related stimuli. Despite the film being subject to various interpretations, it was concluded that most people who are conversant with the Christian tradition see the film as an obvious allegory in which the clown represents Jesus Christ and the circus represents the world. (The film "Parable" is available from the Council of Churches of the City of New York, 475 Riverside Drive, Suite 456, New York, N. Y. 10027.) (Author/ND)

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RESPONSE OF CHURCH RELATED ADULTS TO THE FILM, PARABLE

Richard Ed Davies

Paper presented at the International Convention of the Religious Education Association, November 23-26, 1975, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

The film, Parable, attracted a great deal of attention and controversy when it was first exhibited at the 1964 New York World's Fair (cf. "Christ in grease paint," 1964; "Jesus as a clown," 1964). Since then it has been used widely in Christian education, and this wide use justifies a serious study of the film's effects on an audience. The present paper reports findings of research with adult audiences which may be of particular interest to a person planning to use Parable.

Description of the Film and the Study

Parable is a 20 minute color film which depicts a clown in a circus setting. As depicted in the film, the circus society consists of two classes, workers and managers. The clown wanders through the circus "assuming the burden" of the workers, and in the process he angers the managers. The managers kill the clown, but at the end of the film a clown reappears. There is no dialogue in the film, although there is a sound track consisting of music and natural sounds.

People who use this film are commonly aware that it evokes fairly strong emotional/affective reactions. The present investigation was an attempt to (a) describe these reactions, and (b) relate these reactions to patterns of theological belief. Basic cognitive responses to the film were also solicited.

Theological belief was measured by having participants complete Lee's (1965) Religious Belief Inventory before they watched the film. Emotional/affective reactions were measured by (a) pre-film and

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post-film completion of the Multiple Affect Adjective Check List (cf. Buros, 1972) and (b) post-film semantic differential responses to eleven film-related stimuli. In addition, three questions were asked: (a) "Did you like this film?," (b) "In your opinion, did this film have anything to do with religion?," and (c) "What was the theme of the film? (Answer as briefly as possible.)" The third question called for an open-ended response. The other two questions called for one of three options to be checked: "Yes," "I'm not sure," or "No." Following completion of the response forms, the investigator took informal notes on discussions of the film.

Responses were obtained from 141 adult United Methodist church members and constituents in southern Indiana. They came from sixteen churches, ranged in age from less than 20 to more than 70 (mean between 30 and 39, mode between 40 and 49), and ranged in education from eighth grade to doctoral level (mean 14 years, mode 12 years).

Results

Cognitive Interpretations

We may conclude that most people who are conversant with the Christian tradition will see the film as an obvious allegory in which the clown represents Jesus Christ and the circus represents the world. An analysis of responses to the final free-response question shows that approximately 70 per-cent of the respondents clearly identified the film with the life and work of Jesus Christ (80 per-cent considered that it had a "religious" theme). Ten per-cent of the respondents indicated that they had no idea what the film was about.

The film is subject to various interpretations, but the focus of this ambiguity is not the clown or the setting. The ambiguity is in a character identified as "Magnus the Great." Magnus seems

to be the most important person in the circus. It is immediately after the clown interrupts Magnus's "living marionette" act that he is "crucified." Following the "crucifixion," Magnus broods and then applies clown make-up to his face. It is reasonable to think that Magnus takes the place of the clown at the conclusion of the film, but this is not the only possible explanation of the clown's reappearance.

Who is Magnus? The investigator discovered from discussions that this is a key question. (Unfortunately, individual written responses to this question were not solicited.) People seemed to offer three basic answers to this question: (a) Magnus is "everyman," (b) Magnus is like St. Paul, and (c) Magnus is Satan. Furthermore, all three of these answers were suggested in most of the groups the investigator visited.

If Magnus is "everyman" (or perhaps Pontius Pilate), i.e., a person who is concerned about the tide of events, but is controlled by them more than he controls them, then it makes sense that the original clown might be raised from the dead in the final scene. "Everyman's" attempt to imitate the clown would be in addition to the resurrection.

If Magnus is a strong person who is converted from working against the clown to working for him, i.e., a "St. Paul," then it is quite clear that the clown in the final scene is the converted Magnus. Given this identification of Magnus, some see the final scene as an interpretation of the resurrection. As one respondent put it,

> Film explains Jesus Christ--how he lived, affected people, died for mankind and lives on in other people who follow his example.

According to another respondent,

> He is resurrected by our becoming like him and thus serving others.

Other viewers who see Magnus as a "St. Paul" consider that the film does not deal with the resurrection.

The investigator was surprised at the number of people who saw Magnus as Satan. (There is no estimate of how many people were included in this group.) For these people, the final scene represented the Antichrist assuming a false identity in order to deceive people. For people who adopt this point of view, the film is not concerned with the resurrection. These people see the film as dealing with unredeemed evil. As one respondent said, the theme is

> The falseness of the world we live in and how false and evil things have so much control of our lives.

Of course most viewers do not spontaneously express the logical conclusions of their view of Magnus or other elements in the film. Furthermore, people have a wide variety of reactions to the film which are not accounted for by these three responses to Magnus. Even so, a discussion leader might find it fruitful to focus the initial substantive discussion on Magnus the Great and draw out the implications of various interpretations of the character.

Affective/Emotional Response

Basic response.

In its most basic form, affective response is "like-dislike" response. Affective response is usually quite complex, because a person can "like" certain aspects of a stimulus and "dislike" other aspects with varying degrees of intensity. It is useful to think of emotional response as being relatively strong affective response.

The simple question, "Did you like this film?" is a gross measure of affective response. It provides some indication of response, although a person might report that he did not "like" the film (i.e., did not find it entertaining), even though he valued

the experience of seeing it. (One person said in discussion that he had responded this way.) Out of 117 responses to this question, 42 (36%) indicated that they were not sure whether or not they liked the film, and 24 (21%) indicated that they did not like the film. These responses suggest a high degree of ambivalence among audience members, and support the frequently published suggestion that audiences should discuss the film after seeing it.

Multiple Affect Adjective Check List.

The Multiple Affect Adjective Check List provides three scores: "anxiety," "depression," and "hostility." With few exceptions, all three scores increased after the film was shown. A typical response pattern is illustrated in figure 1, which is a scattergram of pre-film versus post-film "depression" scores.

Does the film actually increase "anxiety," "depression," and "hostility"? One should not be dogmatic or hasty about the interpretation of these scores. They may simply indicate a mood of withdrawn thoughtfulness following the film. Even if the scale names are completely accurate, the scores do not necessarily indicate that the film evokes pathological changes in attitude. These Multiple Affect Adjective Check List results do suggest that the film creates a certain amount of confusion in the viewer. Such confusion results any time individuals confront a new conceptual model or a problem situation in which the problem is not clearly identified, and the leader should be prepared to help viewers deal with this confusion.

Semantic Differential.

Analysis of the semantic differential responses tells us something about the structure of response to this film.

Immediately after they had watched the film, participants in this study were asked to respond to eleven film-related stimuli.

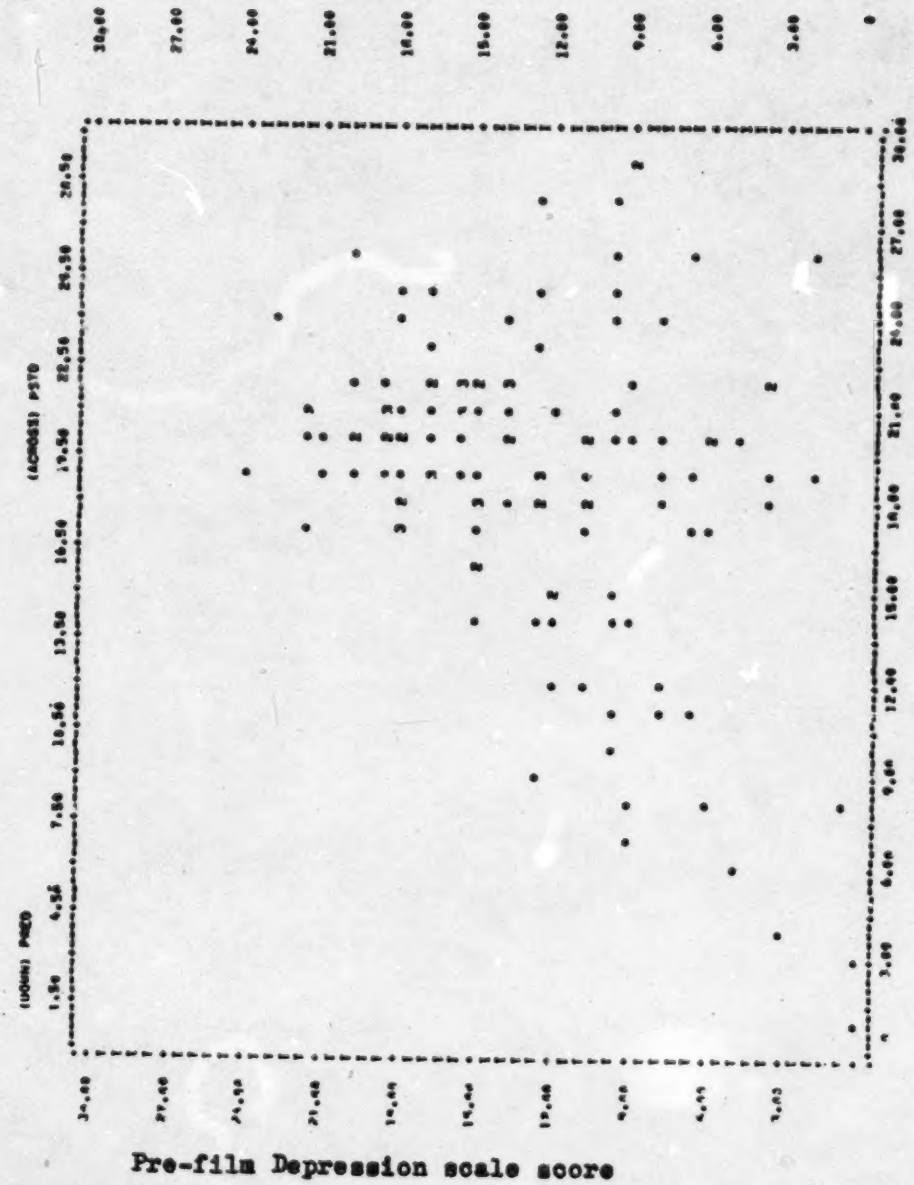


Figure 1. Scattergram of pre-film Depression scores (vertical) versus post-film Depression scores (horizontal).

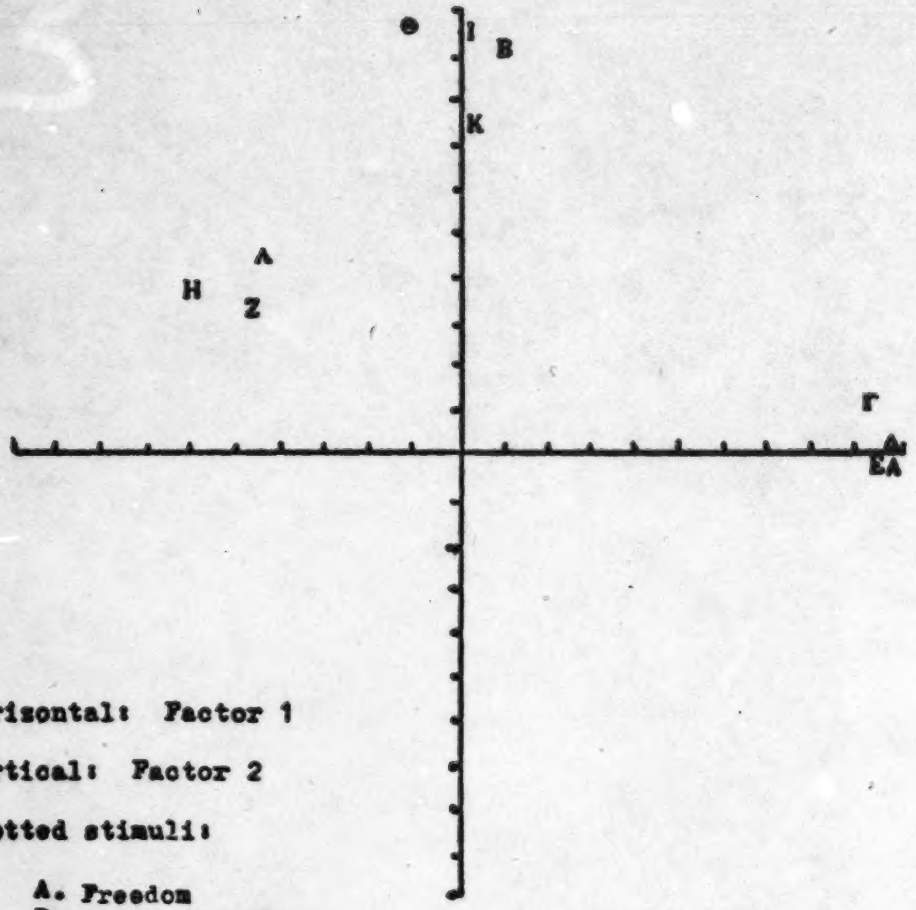
These included seven words and phrases and four pictures. The words and phrases were "freedom," "the film, Parable," "clown," "Jesus Christ," "puppets," "crucifixion," and "Magnus the Great."

The pictures were frames from the film which had been reproduced as 35mm color transparencies. They were (a) a head-and-shoulders shot of the clown facing the camera, (b) a close-up of the clown's face as he cries in agony in the crucifixion scene, (c) a close-up of Magnus's face as he applies white grease paint to his forehead and cheek at the end of the film, and (d) a side-show magician helping his Gypsy-costumed female assistant into a box.

Response to these eleven stimuli was obtained on sixteen semantic differential scales: nice-awful, powerful-powerless, adequate-inadequate, active-passive, coherent-incoherent, heavenly-hellish, strong-weak, hot-cold, clean-dirty, heavy-light, true-false, noisy-quiet, pleasant-unpleasant, deep-shallow, holy-not holy, and fast-slow.

The E-P-A scale factor structure reported by Osgood, Suci, and Tannenbaum (1957) is not considered in the present report. It is discussed in Davies (1975). For the present analysis, responses on the semantic differential were summed over participants and scales to provide a single mean score for each stimulus. The correlation matrix of stimulus scores was subjected to principal components factor analysis (S.P.S.S. program "PA2," Nie, Bent & Hull, 1970).

Relationships among the eleven stimuli are shown in table 1 and figure 2. Two significant factors were found (table 1), and the eleven stimuli formed three clear clusters in relation to these two factors (figure 2).



Horizontal: Factor 1

Vertical: Factor 2

Plotted stimuli:

A. Freedom
B. Film, Parable
Γ. Picture, Clown
Δ. Clown
E. Jesus Christ
Z. Picture, Magic Act
H. Puppets
Θ. Picture, Clown, Agony
I. Crucifixion
K. Picture, Magnus, Make-up
Λ. Magnus the Great

Figure 2. Graphic display of data from Table 1, showing the relation of stimuli to Factors 1 and 2.

Table 2
Factor Analysis of Stimulus Correlations
PA2: Varimax Rotated Factor Matrix
after Rotation with Kaiser Normalization

stimulus	1	2	3	h^2
Freedom	.979	-.024	-.064	.962
Film, Parable	.114	.911	.390	.995
Picture, Clown	.920	.141	-.099	.876
Clown	.982	.005	-.138	.984
Jesus Christ	.968	-.011	-.224	.988
Picture, Magic Act	-.460	.348	.664	.773
Puppets	-.592	.358	.296	.566
Picture, Clown, Agony	-.113	.976	.089	.974
Crucifixion	.007	.952	.156	.932
Pic, Magnus, Make-up	.039	.727	.581	.862
Magnus the Great	-.441	.456	.679	.864
Eigenvalue	5.599	3.684	.493	
Per-cent of Var.	57.3	37.7	5.0	

Viewers tended to have an unreserved positive feeling toward stimuli associated with the first factor (Jesus Christ, the clown, and freedom). These stimuli included both a picture of the clown and the word "clown." The use of the clown as a symbol for Jesus Christ appears to have been successful: people in this study responded both affectively and cognitively to the clown in the same way they responded to Jesus Christ.

The second factor seems to involve a somewhat negative feeling toward the associated stimuli along with a positive feeling that the stimuli are powerful. It is quite possible that a major reason for this kind of response to the film as a whole is the strong emotional impact of the death scene with the clown's cry of agony.

On this second factor, affective response to the film is similar in many ways to affective response to the notion of "crucifixion." It is also closely related to response to the brief scene in which Magnus applies white grease paint to his face. This

information can help the leader understand in a relatively concrete sense the ambivalence of the audience. The film, crucifixion,' and the transformation of Magnus all seem to be less than "pleasant," but quite "powerful."

A third cluster, which falls between the two factors, seems to reflect a negatively tinged ambivalence. It is interesting that the general notion of Magnus the Great related to this cluster, while a picture of Magnus preparing to take the clown's place was closely associated with factor 2.

We might interpret these observations as suggesting that discussion of the film's content should be focused on Magnus and the relationships between the biblical and the filmic crucifixions.

Theological Belief Systems of Viewers

Up to this point the report has been concerned with averages. As it turned out, these findings about average responses were the most important results of this study.

The investigator had hoped to find relationships between response to the film and individual theological belief systems. Multiple regression analysis was used in an attempt to relate affective response to the film (as a dependent variable) to the independent variables of age, sex, educational level, and theological belief structure. Theological belief structure was measured using five scales from Lee's (1965) Religious Belief Inventory augmented with an Intolerance of Ambiguity scale (Robinson & Shaver, 1969, pp. 322-324). The Religious Belief Inventory scales were Puritanism, Pietism, Fundamentalism, Humanism, and Scientism. In no case did the regression analysis account for more than 20 per-cent of the variance, so it cannot be said that the attempt was successful.

Davies (1975) presents a detailed discussion of the attempt to relate film response to theological belief.

Conclusion

The investigator was impressed with the variety of responses to the film within each viewing group. Since the purpose of the study was to investigate response to the film rather than to instruct, the investigator limited his participation in post-film discussions to a few informal simple questions (eg., "Who was Magnus?"). He neither defended nor apologized for the film. Although the churches in the study were sociologically diverse, in almost all groups "liberals" and "conservatives" balenced each other and a lively discussion illuminated most of the points of ambiguity in the film.

Some viewer discussion of this film seems necessary. The investigator has seen the film used in the context of worship without discussion, but responses collected in this study make such use questionable.

The investigator's ministerial acquaintances use this film more frequently with youth than adults. The present study was restricted to adults in the feeling that adult theological belief systems are more fully developed than those of youth. One cannot be certain whether or not responses found in this study would also characterize youth responses.

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NOTE: Parable is available from the Council of Churches of the City of New York, 475 Riverside Drive, Suite 456, New York, N. Y. 10027, phone 749-1214.